

January 31, 2013 Testimony of Germaine White,
Information and Education Specialist, Natural Resources Department
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
In Opposition to SB 143 –

An Act Revising Bison Management Laws; establishing a year-round hunting season; increasing the number of available licenses; prohibiting the transfer, relocation, or transplantation of wild buffalo with certain exceptions; granting rulemaking authority; and amending sections 81-2-120, 81-2-121, 87-1-216, 87-1-301, 87-1-304, 87-2-506, 87-2-506, 87-2-701, 87-2-702, 87-2-730, 87-2-721, and 87-6-304, MCA of 2013

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Committee members. My name is Germaine White; I am the Information and Education Officer for the Natural Resources Department of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. I have also submitted written testimony for the record.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in opposition to SB 143 – An Act Revising Bison Management Laws; establishing a year-round hunting season; increasing the number of available licenses; prohibiting the transfer, relocation, or transplantation of wild buffalo with certain exceptions; granting rulemaking authority; and amending sections 81-2-120, 81-2-121, 87-1-216, 87-1-301, 87-1-304, 87-2-506, 87-2-506, 87-2-701, 87-2-702, 87-2-730, 87-2-721, and 87-6-304, MCA.. I am here today to urge your opposition to this unwise measure that would undo all of the progress that has been made to restore wild bison as valued wildlife in Montana.

BACKGROUND

To fully understand and appreciate the importance of the relationship between our people and bison, it may help to provide some historical and cultural context. I should note that each Tribe in the state of Montana has a unique relationship to bison; I am telling only our story, and would caution against generalizing about other tribes and bison based on the testimony of one.

Our elders were told by their ancestors, across the generations, that the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai people have occupied their vast homelands for thousands of years — and that the relationship with q^weyq^way (bison) lay at the heart of the traditional way of life of the people. For millennia, our tribes drew upon a profound knowledge of our territories and its bountiful resources, moving with the seasons to harvest the plants, animals, and fish in the places and at the times when we knew they would be ready and abundant. When the wild roses bloomed, we knew it was time to go to buffalo. In our recorded oral histories, it is difficult to find any account of buffalo hunting by elders in which they do not discuss the respect for bison and the care taken to use every part of the animal for food, clothing, and tools. For the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai people, it is almost impossible to overstate the spiritual and material importance of bison.

By the 1850s and 1860's, it had become obvious to our hunters that the once-vast herds were dwindling. The slaughter only increased in the 1870's. It was then -- a generation before the formation of the American Bison Society -- that a Pend d'Oreille man named ʔatati (Little Robe of Peregrine Falcon), my Tupyá, my father's great uncle, had a revolutionary idea. With the support and approval of the chiefs and elders, ʔatati brought orphaned calves back across Cadotte's Pass to the Flathead Indian Reservation. This herd, formed originally from genetically pure bison, gradually grew and, eventually increased to about 1,000 animals. The Pend d'Oreille people thus played a critical role in saving the American bison from extinction. Indeed, the Flathead Reservation herd was the origin of the National Bison Range stock, and were also used to supplement the dwindling herd at Yellowstone National Park, which numbered only 35 to 50 bison in the early 1900's.

The relationship with the Yellowstone bison in particular is therefore one with deep roots for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and my family in particular. Not only was this a vital part of our traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering area, but also the bison there are descended in part from the animals saved by one of our highly respected ancestors. We feel a special kinship with these animals and responsibility for their well being.

BISON AND THE CONFEDERATED SALISH & KOOTENAI TRIBES

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes fish and wildlife management programs are organized within the Tribal Natural Resources Department, under the Division of Fish, Wildlife, Recreation and Conservation. The Division's mission is to protect and enhance the fish, wildlife, and wildland resources of the Tribes — including over 1.2 million acres of some of the finest fishing and bird hunting in the nation with more than four hundred miles of streams, seventy thousand acres of lakes, and over a quarter million acres of uplands and wetlands — for continued use by the generations of today and for all future generations. We accomplish this by maintaining professional staffing, monitoring resources, educating users in the wise and ethical use of the resources, and coordinating with other agencies. We have been fortunate during the past few years to collaborate with the agencies that manage bison in the Yellowstone area. The Division staff members — about 70 employees — strive to be leaders in conservation management. The many accomplishments of my Tribe are too numerous to elaborate on during the short time we have here. They include:

- The historic signing in 1990 of a landmark agreement between the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the state of Montana governing bird hunting and fishing on the Flathead Indian Reservation, which has proved over time to be a great success.
- Ongoing management of 97,000 acres of primitive areas.
- Acquisition and management of over 11,000 acres of fish and wildlife habitat by the Tribal Wildlife Management Program.
- Acquisition of over 4,600 acres of land, including 27 miles of streams and lake habitat, to offset impacts to fisheries.

OPPOSITION TO SB 143 – AN ACT REVISING BISOIN MANAGEMENT LAWS;

ESTABLISHING A YEAR-ROUND HUNTING SEASON; INCREASING THE NUMBER OF AVAILABLE LICENSES; PROHIBITING THE TRANSFER OF WILD BUFFALO WITH CERTAIN EXCEPTIONS; GRANTING RULEMAKING AUTHORITY; AND AMENDING SECTIONS 81-2-120, 81-2-121, 87-1-216, 87-1-301, 87-1-304, 87-2-506, 87-2-506, 87-2-701, 87-2-702, 87-2-730, 87-2-721, and 87-6-304, MCA OF 2013.

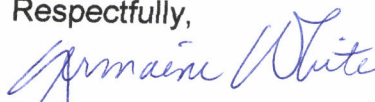
I would like to remind the Committee of some important points for your consideration. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes signed the Hellgate Treaty of 1855. Treaties, as you know, are the most solemn obligations between nations. At the Hellgate Treaty, one of the signers was a Pend d' Oreille leader named Alexa, Alexander, my ilawiya, my 5 generation grandfather, ensures the reserved right of our Tribal members to hunt off-Reservation on open and unclaimed lands within our aboriginal territory. Wild free roaming bison that occupy federal lands outside Yellowstone National Park have historically and continue today to provide high quality food for our families that we have relied on from the beginning of time. Bison parts continue to serve as tools and make up an important part of our cultural practice. For those reasons alone, I urge you to maintain wild free roaming bison on the landscape of Montana.

But one of the most important parts of the bill for us, as Indian people, is that it prohibits the treatment of buffalo as valued, native wildlife, which is exactly what they are. Wild bison are and always have been native wildlife. To treat them otherwise is a violation of our cultural values as Tribal people and goes against the respect and responsibility we hold for the animal. We recognize the economic value of wild bison to businesses, hunters, and outfitters, and we give thanks to the Creator and the bison for the gifts of food, tools, shelter and clothing that they have provided to our people for thousands of years. But we also believe bison are not just here to provide material things for humans. They have intrinsic value. They have a right to exist because they are part of Creation, and they have a right to live in the way they always have, as native wildlife, because that is what the Creator intended. We believe there is room in the state of Montana for wild bison, and we, as Montanans and as Tribal people, place great value on their presence.

CLOSING

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have always been good stewards of our resources both on and off the Reservation. Today, we strive to achieve good stewardship through continued excellent fish and wildlife management. We continue our cultural traditions, and maintain good working relationships with the agencies involved in bison management that serve as members of the Interagency Bison Management Plan. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes oppose SB 143 and respectfully ask the Committee not to pass this bill to the Senate floor.

Respectfully,


Germaine White